

**Testimony of Rep. Jim Cooper
to the House Select Committee on Redistricting
Cordell Hull Building, Nashville, Sept. 8, 2021**

Every ten years, every state legislature, including the Tennessee General Assembly, has the solemn responsibility of easing the growing pains of our democracy. Because counties, cities and towns have grown or shrunk in population in the last ten years, you have the duty to make sure that every district is the same size in population, not geography, so that everyone's vote counts the same. This principle was proudly established in a Tennessee case, *Baker v. Carr*, that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1963.

I believe that your solemn duty is to preserve county boundaries and communities as much as you possibly can. Tennessee law forces you to keep as many counties whole as possible when you draw your own districts; you should use the same standard for congressional districts. Every county and community deserve its own unique voice in our republic whenever possible. Keeping counties whole respects the decisions that average citizens have already made to live and work in the community that they have chosen. My guess is that you won't see the counties of the most powerful people in state government chopped up because those leaders know that the people in those counties would complain bitterly. No one likes to be chopped up politically, regardless of political party. Let's apply the Golden Rule here: if you don't want your home county chopped up, please don't needlessly chop up others.

I believe that Davidson County and Nashville have the strongest case in Tennessee to be kept whole because we are the state capital, we are the economic engine of the state, we have already bound ourselves together in a combined Metropolitan government, and we are perhaps the hottest destination in America for both tourists and corporations because of our unique blend of music, business, hospitality, low taxes, and friendliness. We have also grown to be almost the exact size of a modern congressional district, about 780,000 people. To dismember Nashville is to destroy Nashville, to ruin the recipe for success that has made Nashville the envy of America. Forget about me; whoever represents Nashville deserves to represent the whole city, not remnants of it. Nashville is a living city, not a pound of flesh. Nashvillians should be able to find their congressman or congresswoman in Nashville, not Cookeville, Clarksville, Franklin, Murfreesboro, or South Pittsburgh. Let's be blunt: Nashvillians deserve to have their largely Democratic voices heard, not imprisoned in a Republican district where their Democratic voices are silenced.

To split Nashville apart for purely political reasons, to gerrymander Davidson County, would also break the promise that Tennessee has made with some of the most important corporations in America. Oracle, the biggest corporate addition in Tennessee history, chose to locate in Nashville, not somewhere in Middle Tennessee. Amazon also chose to locate in Nashville, not elsewhere. The same for Alliance Bernstein and the other marquee names that have come to Tennessee recently. Our giant health care companies say they are headquartered in Nashville. Our universities say they are located in Nashville. We are the recruiting hook.

The employees of these new companies and our many loyal legacy corporations and non-profits often choose to live in “an oasis of blue in a sea of red.” If they are Democrats, they can live in Davidson County. If not, they can live in one of the ring counties. They have a choice that they will not have if all the congressional districts in Middle Tennessee are Republican. I believe that this choice, this political competition, makes us all better and stronger. Competition built America, not monopoly. Republicans already have a 7-2 advantage in the congressional delegation; is that not enough? Do you have to make it 8-1 or 9-0? Do you have to have it all? We should empower all Tennesseans by letting them choose what sort of representation they want in Washington, D.C., not lock Tennessee Democrats in political jail.

To split Nashville apart politically is also to silence the growing voice of the African-American, Hispanic, and other minority communities in Nashville. When they concentrate their voting power today, they are able to win elected office because they live in Davidson County. If their home in Nashville is suddenly in a new district that is only a tiny piece of a much larger, rural, white district, they might as well not even bother going to the polls because they know they will be outvoted. That is voter suppression at its worst. That is gerrymandering at its worst. That is institutional racism at its worst.

Each of you is an officeholder and knows the hard work that you have done in the last ten years making sure that you know as much as possible about your district and your constituents. You have a huge personal investment in that district. You know every nook and cranny. Every officeholder wants to keep as much of that district and that investment as possible because it's fairer to voters and to incumbents as well.

I've lived through every Tennessee redistricting since 1980. This will be the fifth time. I don't know if precedent matters, but every previous time all the incumbents of both parties were polled so that they could make the case for keeping their old district as unchanged as possible. The wishes of both parties were respected. It is true that the five previous redistricting decisions were not models of openness and transparency to the public, but they were to incumbents of both parties. That was not good enough but it was better, much better, than what we can look forward to today: a quick vote in January that suddenly transforms all of Tennessee into a Republican monopoly.

I have sponsored legislation in Congress for many years, just like my former colleague John Tanner before me, that would require bipartisan redistricting commissions and full transparency but we all know the difficulty of getting that passed into federal law, although more and more states are adopting those higher standards on their own. The fundamental power of my legislation is that voters should choose their elected officials in a democracy, not the other way around. Your committee should choose that path. You have the power to do it.

Please allow democracy to keep working in Tennessee by respecting voters, all voters, and by keeping our beloved state capital whole. You came to Nashville to build a better state, not join a wrecking crew.